NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Enduring Questions
Institution: SUNY Brockport

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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

1100 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506
ROOM 302

ENDURINGQUESTIONS@NEH.GOV
202.606.8500
WWW.NEH.GOV

National Endowment for the Humanities
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Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a grant application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. The excerpt does not include a budget or résumé.

Project Title: Confronting Mortality

Institution: SUNY Brockport

Project Director: Austin Busch

Grant Program: Enduring Questions Course Grants

"Confronting Mortality" will be offered as a fifteen-week junior-level course fulfilling an elective requirement for the English major at the SUNY College at Brockport, a comprehensive public university. It is fully supported by the College administration, and as Dean Appelle's letter indicates, the course would satisfy a college-wide general education requirement (Contemporary Issues) and an Honors Program requirement as well. This course will encourage students to consider the implications of human mortality: What is death? Is it reasonable to expect an afterlife? If so, how might one conceive of it? Can we resolve the problem of personal identity life after death entails? How do the living come to terms with loved ones' demises? Is it ethically permissible to take our deaths into our own hands by ending our lives? How do advances in biomedical technology affect our thinking about death?

"Confronting Mortality" will address these questions through a sustained program of reading, but its particular inquiries mandate an additional step: everyone dies, and everyone experiences death alone; therefore each of us must chart a philosophical approach to mortality that will allow us to face death in a way each judges admirable. The texts we read will offer helpful suggestions, will reveal problems that certain approaches to death entail, but which we might otherwise ignore. In the end, however, each of us must take responsibility for developing an intellectual strategy for confronting death's inevitability. Students will be encouraged from the start to view the readings as intellectual and aesthetic tools, which they must use constructively and imaginatively as they formulate their own philosophies of mortality.

Unit 1: Death and afterlife

We shall begin by considering the *Phaedo's* argument for an immortal soul (in its entirety), paying careful attention to Platonic idealism. We shall then turn to Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* (books 1-3 of 6) and examine its arguments against the soul's immortality, with especial reference to the materialist view of the cosmos it espouses. We shall also consider two "religious" conceptions of afterlife: the early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine of bodily

resurrection, and the Buddhist concept of rebirth. These will be studied independently of religious dogma: thoughtfully considered, they reveal assumptions we make about our place in the universe, as well as about the nature of our "selves," both of which have far-reaching implications for how we view mortality.

Bodily resurrection, as presented in the biblical texts Daniel, 1 Corinthians 15, and Revelation 20-22 (as well as in later Christian, rabbinic Jewish, and Islamic texts we shall read[1]), integrates supernaturally transformed bodies into an eschatologically renewed cosmos from which death and corruption have been eradicated. These texts view death as a destructive force that God must overcome, rather than as physical matter's natural dissolution (which may actually obfuscate the enduring survival of a transcendent immaterial soul). In its cosmic dimensions resurrection recognizes an analogy, even an intimacy, between self and world that alternate visions of afterlife may preclude. The Buddhist teaching of rebirth, especially as Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (entirety) addresses it, reveals and challenges assumptions about the self's unity over time that generate much of our concern about life after death.

I expect students to approach philosophical and "religious" texts critically, in order to discern their valuable insights as well as their authentic problems—and to do this regardless of whether or not the ideas these texts articulate complement their own religious beliefs. But since students are ultimately responsible for constructing personal philosophies of mortality, I cannot suggest that their beliefs are irrelevant to our inquiries, if I hope for this course to represent more than an academic exercise. This unit, then, must not only introduce students to sophisticated religio-philosophical views of death, but must also train them to engage in open dialogue with authors and colleagues whose perspectives they may find foreign.

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[1] To underscore broad agreement between orthodox Christian, rabbinic Jewish, and classical Islamic traditions about bodily resurrection, as well as to consider some of this doctrine's complexities and permutations (including various attempts to reconcile it with a more-or-less Platonic conception of the immortal soul), I shall assign Tertullian's *On the Resurrection* (selections), excerpts from the Talmud, Moses Maimonides' *Treatise on Resurrection* (entirety), a handful of Quranic passages, and excerpts from Al-Ghazālī's magnum opus *The Revival of Religious Sciences* (bk. 40, pt. 1, ch. 7 and sections of pt. 2).

Unit 2: Loss and Commemoration

This unit explores mourning and commemoration through a careful reading of Homer's *Iliad* (entirety) and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (entirety). The Victorian poem offers a generous philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic exploration of the experience of losing a friend. Our study of it will include examination of the imagery it uses to figure mourning, consolation, and hope in the face of death, and then a visit to Mount Hope Cemetery, a sprawling Victorian burial ground in nearby Rochester, whose sepulchers and landscaping employ similar motifs.[2]

The *Iliad's* sustained meditation on death in war raises issues about public and private mourning, about the decision to give one's life in military service, about the compensation one can expect for that sacrifice, etc. The epic's intense descriptions of battle—which introduce soldier after soldier by name, family, and homeland before aesthetically transforming them into mutilated and dismembered bodies—establishes Homer's poem as a troubling imaginative commemoration of those who died in the legendary (and absurd) Trojan War. When students read carefully, the slaughter Homer commemorates carries an emotional intensity, which I will leverage to encourage them to empathize with the *Iliad's* characters and to invest psychologically in this difficult work. I will capitalize on this investment by inviting a military chaplain to speak about soldiers' experiences with death and dying comrades in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and I will in turn draw on that discussion as a supplementary context for reading the *Iliad*.

Unit 3: Suicde

Since we all must die, may we legitimately decide when and how by taking our own lives? If so, under what circumstances? We shall pursue this question by returning to Plato's *Phaedo* and then considering some letters of Seneca (e.g. *Ep.* 58, 66, and 70, in their entirety),

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[2] Transportation costs are budgeted, but carpools would be used after funding expires. Also budgeted is an honorarium for Prof. Emil Homerin (University of Rochester), an expert in Mt. Hope's sepulchral iconography, whom I will invite to address the class.

brief excerpts from Augustine and Aquinas, selections from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, Hume's "Of Suicide" (entirety), a passage from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, several of Schopenhauer' essays (read in their entirety), and Michael Walzer's "The Obligation to Live for the State" (entirety). This unit's occasional use of excerpts is justified by the narrow question it addresses.[3]

Unit 4: Biomedical Death

The final unit invites students to situate human mortality within the context of biomedicine's ability to prolong life in the face of disease, trauma, and agedness. We shall begin with Poe's "The Premature Burial" (1844) to underscore how innovative our reliance on biomedicine is: far from expecting physicians to delay death or even prevent it, people not so long ago feared lest physicians diagnose them as dead while they still lived! With reference to Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich* (entirety), we shall consider, among other things, the possibility that medicine helps mask the philosophical, spiritual, and emotional problems human mortality entails. We shall also read James Rachels's classic essay "Active and Passive Euthanasia," which reveals a troubling lack of philosophical coherence in an approach to end-of-life care many find intuitively appealing. We shall close with Daniel Callahan's *The Troubled Dream of Life: in Search of a Peaceful Death* (entirety). While valuing biomedicine, Callahan argues that its role in determining how we face mortality should be circumscribed. We shall consider to what extent Callahan's argument persuades, and whether alternative arguments might be more compelling.

Course Assignments

To help ensure students complete the course's ambitious program of reading, I will regularly assign informal writing assignments requiring their careful reading of the texts with questions in mind that will facilitate fruitful class discussion. Grades will be determined on the

[3] I will be attentive to any suggestions students make that our discussions about suicide have personal relevance, and am prepared to intervene with appropriate urgency, for instance by referring (or even accompanying) troubled students to the Health Center.

basis of participation (including informal writing) and a series of formal writing assignments requiring reflective engagement with the course's readings. For example, students might compose a dialogue between Plato and Nāgārjuna about what happens to the self after death.

A capstone assignment will require students to pose a question related to mortality and construct an answer in dialogue with the course's readings. I will expect these to be reasonable, coherent, and—I hope—personally meaningful. To encourage students to approach this assignment as more than an academic exercise, I will host a reception (which a Brockport Faculty-Staff Interaction grant should fund) at which students can discuss informally with me and one another how the course's readings have begun to affect (or not) their personal views about death. The reception will include a time for break-out groups, wherein students will share their proposals for the final assignment and offer feedback to colleagues. These groups will meet again approximately one week before the assignment's submission to read and critique drafts.

Project Director

As an assistant professor of early world literatures, I teach biblical, classical, and other literature courses. I have published on Seneca and the New Testament and am currently co-editing the Norton Critical Edition of the New Testament and Apocrypha. Teaching evaluations from students and colleagues are universally strong: I have a reputation as an inspiring and challenging professor and, in my Bible classes especially, I have acquired valuable experience walking the line between respecting students' personal beliefs and compelling them to think about controversial philosophical, theological, and political issues from perspectives that might prompt those beliefs' re-evaluation. My pedagogical approach facilitates the emergence of intellectual communities willing to discuss profound issues in informed and meaningful ways. Such discussions will be commonplace in "Confronting Mortality," and I expect them to continue outside the walls of my classroom, where they will enrich SUNY Brockport's broader intellectual environment.

Texts the class will read (occasionally in excerpt; see narrative for details)

Al-Ghazālī. *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife (Book XL of the Revival of the Religious Sciences).* Trans. T. J. Winter. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica.* Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 2nd edn. 1920. New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947.

Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God Against the Pagans.* Trans. R. W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Callahan, Daniel. *The Troubled Dream of Life: in Search of a Peaceful Death.* 1993. Washington: Georgetown UP, 2000.

Homer. *Iliad.* Trans. Richmond Lattimore. 1951. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.

Hume, David. "Of Suicide." 1783.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.* Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government.* 1690.

Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things.* Trans. Martin Ferguson Smith. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001.

Maimonides, Moses. *Treatise on Resurrection.* Trans. Fred Rosner. 1982. Lanham: Jason Aronson, 1997.

Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.* (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way.*) Trans. and ed. Jay L. Garfield. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Plato. *Phaedo.* Trans David Gallop. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Premature Burial." 1844.

Rachels, James. "Active and Passive Euthanasia." *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975): 78-80.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essays and Aphorisms.* Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 1970.

Seneca. *Epistles.* 3 vols. Trans. Richard Gummere. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1917-25.

Tennyson, Alfred. *In Memoriam.* Ed. Eric Gray. 2nd edn. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003.

Tertullian. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh.* Trans. Peter Holmes. Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3. 1885. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004.

Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich.* Trans. Hugh Aplin. London: Hesperus, 2005.

Walzer, Michael. "The Obligation to Live for the State." *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship.* 1970. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005.

Selection of texts I will consult

Ariès, Philippe. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present.* Trans. Patricia Ranum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.

Barrry, Vincent. *Philosophical Thinking about Death and Dying.* Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007.

Beck, Martha. *The Self-Corrective Development of the Concepts of Soul, Forms and Immortality in Three Arguments of the Phaedo.* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2000.

Bodhi, Bhikkhu. *Transcendental Dependent Arising: A Translation and Exposition of the Upanisa Sutta.* Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980.

Bostock, David. *Plato's Phaedo.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336.* New York: Columbia UP, 1995.

Cholbi, Michael. "Kant and the Irrationality of Suicide." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17 (2000): 159–176

Curl, James S. *The Victorian Celebration of Death.* 2nd edn. Charleston: History Press, 2001.
Dworkin, Gerald, R.G. Freyand, and Sissela Bok. *Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide: For and Against.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998
Garland, Robert. *The Greek Way of Death.* 2nd edn. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001.
Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
Gold, Barri J. "The Consolation of Physics: Tennyson's Thermodynamic Solution." *PMLA* 117 (2002): 449-64.
Griffin, Jasper. *Homer on Life and Death.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
Hamilton, Sue. *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism.* London: Luzac Oriental, 1996.
Inwood, Brad. *Reading Seneca.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
Jacquette, Dale. "Schopenhauer on the Ethics of Suicide." *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000): 43-58.
Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography.* Gibbs Smith: Layton, 2004.
Levenson, Jon D. *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.
Lucretius. *De rerum natura libri sex.* Eds. William Ellery Leonard and Stanley Barney Smith. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1968.
Ludwig, Allen. *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and its Symbols, 1650-1815.* 3rd edn. Hanover, Wesleyan UP, 1999.
Martin, Dale B. *The Corinthian Body.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1995.
Martin, Raymond and John Barresi. *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity.* New York: Columbia UP, 2008.
Minois, Georges. *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture.* Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
Murti, T. R. V. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of Madhyamika System.* 1955. New Deli: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub Pvt Ltd, 2003.
Nagy, Gregory. *The Best of the Acheans.* Rev. edn. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.
Noonan, Harold W. *Personal Identity.* 2nd edn. London: Routledge, 2002.
Peltason, Timothy. *Reading In Memoriam.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.
Sedley, David. *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
Segal, Alan F. *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion.* New York: Doubleday, 2004.
Smith, Jane Idleman and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad. *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection.* 1981. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
Strong, John S. *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations.* 2nd edn. Wadsworth: Belmont, 2002.
Szasz, Thomas Stephen. *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide.* Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2002.
Wofford, Susanne Lindgren. *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992.
Wolf-Harmut, Friedrich. *Wounding and Death in the Iliad: Homeric Techniques of Description.* Trans. Peter Jones and Gabriele Wright. London: Duckworth, 2003.
Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God.* Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.